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Abuse of the Patriot Act

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FOR MANY, the fear all along was that, sooner or later, it would come to this: The Patriot Act, which sidesteps due process and overrides certain civil liberties for the sake of combating international terrorism, is now being used by federal law enforcement as a tool against non-terrorists as well.

In a report to Congress, the U.S. Justice Department admits taking advantage of the powerful act to investigate, wiretap, surveil and confiscate millions of dollars in alleged crime-related assets from U.S. citizens.

This is not how the White House sold the idea to Congress and rest of us just five days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft has consistently portrayed the law as a way to disrupt terrorism,

bristling at suggestions that it might be used otherwise. "We have used (the act) to prevent terrorists from unleashing more death and destruction on our soil," he said.

But he failed to mention that his agency is also using the Patriot Act's sweeping authority to investigate suspected financial crimes, drug dealers, computer hackers, cash smugglers, child pornographers and more.

If the Bush administration wants to peel back constitutional guarantees of due process for such crimes, it should do so forthrightly -- not in a stealth move, under the guise of fighting terrorism.

Congress should weigh the law's impact and scrutinize its potential for abuse before deciding whether to extend it beyond 2005.

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